

...And Justice For All

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Photo by Bill Sitzmann.

Wrongfully evicted? Fighting for child custody? Denied health benefits?

For legal assistance with any of these cases, you may hire a lawyer for as low as \$253 per hour!

Luckily for Nebraskans who don't have tens of thousands of dollars to spare, there is a unique ace they can slip up their sleeves.

Legal Aid of Nebraska is an organization that provides civil legal services to low-income clients (defined by an average salary of about \$22,000 per year) for free. Formed in 1963, according to their mission statement, they work to "ensure the fair enforcement of the law, to protect the rights of the people, and to address the urgent legal needs of our communities." The organization was founded on the belief that everyone, regardless of socio-economic status, is entitled to proper legal representation.

To realize this goal, Legal Aid provides quality pro bono services, or professional work undertaken voluntarily without charge.

"There is a civil legal justice gap in the U.S., and that gap increases every year," said Laurie Heer Dale, executive director at Legal Aid of Nebraska. "There is a growing number of people who are of low income who need critical legal services to address their day-to-day needs. We focus our work in four key priority areas to bridge that gap—housing, family, public benefits, and finance."

Unlike in criminal law, citizens are not entitled to professional representation for most civil cases. "There are a lot of folks who have unmet legal needs because our legal system is incredibly complicated," Heer Dale explained. "Our court system is based on

the notion that everybody who comes to court is going to have an attorney. Unfortunately, that's not the case. If a person doesn't have access to an attorney, they are not going to get the same level of justice."

Enter Kutak Rock. As one of the top law firms in the United States, Kutak Rock boasts over 550 lawyers and offices across the country. The firm was founded in 1965 by Bob Kutak and Harold Rock, who both held a deep sense of responsibility to their clients and their communities.

"Legal Aid is so important to the firm as a whole," said Amy Van Horne, a partner at Kutak Rock and current president of the board of Legal Aid of Nebraska. "It's been baked into the DNA of Kutak Rock from its founding; there was always a belief that one of the responsibilities of attorneys was to participate in and serve the local communities. Civil legal services to the poor were part of the responsibilities of every attorney according to Harold and Bob."

The firm has upheld this belief since its inception, and it drives the work ethic and professional mission of every employee.

A match made in heaven, Kutak Rock and Legal Aid of Nebraska naturally came together in partnership—a relationship that has been fostered and cherished by both companies since the beginning.

Kutak Rock earned Legal Aid of Nebraska's 2023 Lifetime Law Firm Partner Equal Justice Award, commemorating the lifetime partnership of the two organizations. The legacy of Kutak Rock's founders is carried on by its lawyers, who aim to do work that would make them proud.

"At Mr. Rock's funeral," Van Horne recalled, "one of the Legal Aid coordinators came up to me and let me know that she had absolutely no idea who Harold Rock was before he had passed away. She just knew him as Harold, a regular volunteer for the organization." The selfless donation of time and attention that Rock and Kutak gave to charitable organizations like Legal Aid is what they built their law firm to reflect, and those values are still apparent today.

"It's been interesting to me to see our young lawyers especially are very committed to pro bono service across the board," noted Van Horne. "It seems like the current recent graduates have the mindset that they want to help, and I think that's really cool."

When it comes to civil cases, more than 50% of people are unrepresented. Currently, the prominent area is eviction cases, in which more than 90% of tenants are unrepresented and cannot afford legal assistance. "When people think of our clients, there is often this preconceived notion that they are 'deadbeats' or people who can't support themselves, which is not true at all," Heer Dale said. "These people are often working multiple jobs and just can't afford to pay a lawyer upwards of \$250 per hour."

Legal Aid works with a lot of people with disabilities, people who are chronically ill, and people who have children—all of which make financial issues even more strenuous.

The partnership has helped countless Nebraskans, and the numbers show just that. "In 2022, we had an impact of more than \$11 million on behalf of our clients," Heer Dale noted. "In 2023, we had over 19,000 requests for assistance, and we're looking at over a \$13-million impact."

For more information, visit legalaidofnebraska.org and kutakrock.com/offices/omaha

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